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## Oscar Wilde Is Alive!

*By Arthur Cravan*

*(Continued)*

I then commenced to study him. I examined his head first, which was furrowed with profound wrinkles and nearly bald. The thought dominating me was that Wilde seemed more musical than plastic, without wishing to give a very precise sense to this definition; truly, more musical than plastic. I regarded him above all in his ensemble. He was beautiful. In his arm-chair, he had the air of an elephant; he crushed the seat, where he was cramped; before those enormous arms and legs I sought, admiringly, to imagine the divine sentiments possessing such members. I considered the width of his boots; the foot was relatively small, a bit flat, which should have sufficed to give its possessor the cadenced and dreamy dignity of pachyderms, and, thus set up, to mysteriously make a poet of him. I adored him because he resembled a large beast; I pictured him . . . simply, as a hippopotamus, and the image ravished me because of its candour and justice; for without friends of evil influence, he must have hoped for all things from inauspicious climates, and had returned either from the East Indies or Sumatra, or from elsewhere. Very certainly, he had wished to die in the sun—perhaps in Obock—and it is somewhere in those parts that I poetically figured him, among the riotous greenery of Africa, amid the music of flies, living like a brute.

What strengthened this idea in me, is that the new Wilde was reserved, and that I had known a postman, equally mute, who might have been an imbecile, but who seemed saved because he had once sojourned in Saïgon.

Time aiding, I understood him better on noting his heavy eyes, with the morbid and rare eye-lashes; with eye-balls that seemed to me chestnut, though I should not be able, without lying, to state their veritable color; and a stare that at no point fixed itself, but spread, like a large cloth. Understanding him better, I could not repel the reflexion: that he was more musical than plastic; and I was surprised that the world should not have sooner come to the opinion that it had before it a lost man.

His bloated visage was diseased; the thick, bloodless lips would at times uncover teeth that were rotten and scrofulous, repaired with gold; a great white and brown beard—I almost always perceived

this last color, unable to admit white—masked his chin. I pretended that the hairs were silvery, without being it, because there was something as if grilled in them, the clusters they formed seemed tinted with the ardent hues of the skin. It had pushed forth indifferently, in the same manner that time, that Oriental boredom, prolong themselves.

It was only later that I noticed my guest laughed continuously, not with the nervous contraction of Europeans, but in the absolute. Last of all, his dress interested me; I noticed that he wore a black suit, passably old, and I felt his indifference for the toilette.

A radiant solitaire, that I could not refrain from coveting, gleamed on his left ear, and Wilde assumed great prestige from it.

I had been to seek a bottle of cherry brandy in the kitchen, and had already poured several glasses; we were also smoking excessively; I had begun to lose my discretion and to become noisy; it was then that I permitted myself to ask this vulgar question: "Have they never recognized you?"

Yes, several times, above all at first, in Italy. One day even, in the train, a person seated opposite me gazed at me so intently that I thought it advisable to unfold my newspaper and put it up, so as to escape his curiosity; for I was not unaware that this man knew I was Sebastian Melmoth. Wilde persisted in naming himself thus. And, what is more frightful, this man followed me when I left the train,—I believe it was in Padua,—seated himself opposite to me in the restaurant, and having, I cannot tell by what means, picked up some acquaintances—for, like me, the man seemed a stranger,—he had the horrible pleasantry to cite my name of poet aloud, feigning discourse on my works.

And all of them turned, their eyes drilling me, to see if I would falter. Nothing was left me but to quit the village that night.

I also found men whose eyes were profounder than the eyes of other men, and whose glances clearly said, "I salute you, Sebastian Melmoth!"

I was prodigiously interested, and added: "You are alive, when all the world thinks you dead; M. Davray, for example, affirmed to me that he had touched you and that you were dead."

"Why, of course, I was dead," my visitor answered, with a manner so atrociously natural that I feared for his reason.

"For my part, my imagination has always seen you in the tomb, between two thieves, like Christ!"

I then asked him for particulars about a trinket fixed to his watch-chain, which, he apprized me, was no other than Marie An-

toinette's gold key, once serving to open the secret door of the Petit Trianon.

We drank more and more, and observing Wilde, who was becoming singularly cheerful, I got it in my head to intoxicate him; for he now laughed with great guffaws, reversed in his arm-chair.

I continued: "Have you read the pamphlet that Andre Gide—what an ass—published on you? He has not understood that you were mocking him in the parable ending more or less thus: 'And this is called the disciple.' Poor devil, he did not take it as meant for him!"

And later, where he shows both of you on the terrasse of a cafe, did you take notice of the passage where the old miser hints that he gave you alms? How much did he give you? A louis?

Five francs, articulated my uncle, irresistibly comic.

I continued: "Have you entirely given up work?"

Oh no, I have finished my memoirs.—My God, how droll!—I still have a volume of verse in preparation, and I've written four theatre pieces . . . for Sarah Bernhardt! he exclaimed, laughing very loud.

I love the theatre very much, but I am never really at my ease till my personages are seated and about to chat.

Listen, old man,—I was becoming very familiar—I am going to make you a little proposition and, at the same time, to show myself a discreet manager. Here it is; I publish a little literary review, where I have already exploited you,—it's beautiful, a *literary* review!—and I shall ask you for one of your books, which I will publish as a posthumous work; but, if you prefer, I become your impresario; I immediately sign you a contract for a tour of lectures in the music halls. If speaking bores you, I shall exhibit you in exotic dances, or in pantomime, with chorus girls.

Wilde was more and more amused. Then, suddenly melancholy, he said: "And Nelly?" That is my mother. This question caused me a bizarre physical effect, for, several times, had they not half informed me of my mysterious birth, very vaguely enlightened me, leaving me to suppose that Oscar Wilde might be my father? I recounted all I knew about her; I even added that Mme. Wilde, before dying, had rendered him a visit in Switzerland. I spoke to him of M. Lloyd—my father?—calling his attention to the jest he had made about him: "He is the most insipid [*plat*] man I have ever met." Deceiving my expectations, Wilde seemed chagrined at this souvenir.

I brought forth, regarding his son Vivian and my own family, what was most likely to interest him; but soon I perceived that he

was no longer with me.

He had interrupted me but once, during my long discourse, to become emphatic, when I let him know my hatred of Swiss scenery. "Yes," he punctuated, "how can they like the Alps? For me, the Alps are no more than big photographs in black and white. When I am in the neighborhood of high mountains, I feel myself crushed; I lose all sense of my personality; I am no longer myself; my sole desire is to get away. When I descend into Italy, little by little, I find myself once more: I become a man again."

As the conversation had dropped, he resumed: "Tell me about yourself."

I then made him a picture of my adventurous life; I gave him a thousand details of my childhood as *garçon terrible* in all the lycées, schools and institutions of Europe; of my hazardous life in America; the anecdotes multiplied; and Wilde would cease laughing gayly only to enjoy, in convulsions, every passage wherein my charming instincts came to light. And it was, "Oh dear, oh dear's," continuously.

The bottle of cherry brandy was empty, and the rowdy \* gradually took birth in me.

I brought out three litres of *vin ordinaire*, the only beverage remaining; but, when I offered it to my new friend, the latter, much swollen, made a gesture of refusal with his hand.

Come on! have a bloody drink! I exclaimed, with the accent of an American boxer, at which he seemed a little shocked; "Good Lord, I have killed your dignity."

He accepted, nevertheless, emptied his glass at a gulp, and sighed; "In all my life, I have never drunk as much."

Shut up, old souse! I yelled, pouring another drink. Then, breaking all bounds, I began to interrogate him as follows: "Old carcass! will you tell me right off where you come from? How did you manage to know the floor I live in?" And I cried: "Will you, will you make haste and answer; are you still at your faking stunt? Ah no, really, *j'suis pas ton pere!* And insulting him amid abominable belching: 'Eh! get out! you bum-eyed street-loafer, you good-for nothing mush-face, immense cow, old *tante*. . . . !

I do not know if Wilde savored these enormous jokes, where wit had gone the whole hog, so to speak,—an easy trick, and which per-

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\* *Voyou*.

mits one to preserve, amid the most apparent trivialities, all one's nobility; no doubt that evening I wished not to depart from a certain coquetry; for, in these cases, the elegance I have described rests but on the intention, a thing so trifling that it will always tempt a juggler, even though he knew all the price of mere vulgarity.

However this may be, Wilde told me, laughing: "How droll you are! But, Aristide Bruant, what is become of him?" Which immediately called up in me, mentally: "You've said it, Charles, now you've said it, *bouffi*."

At a certain moment, my visitor even ventured: "I am dry." Which can be translated thus: "Je suis sec." And I filled his glass again. Then, with an immense effort, he arose; but, promptly, with a push of my fore-arm, I flattened him—this is the precise term—on his arm-chair. Without protest, he pulled out his watch: it was a quarter of three. Forgetting to consult his wishes, I shout: "To Montmartre! We shall go on a spree." Wilde seems unable to resist, and his face shines with joy; nevertheless, he said, weakly: "I can't, I can't." I am going to take you round the bars and bore you; there, I shall pretend to lose you, and will cry out, very loud: "Oscar Wilde, come have a whiskey." You'll see, we shall be astonishing! and you will thus prove that society has availed nothing against your fine organism. And I said again, like Satan: "Besides, are you not the King of Life?"

—You are a terrible boy, murmured Wilde, in English. My God! I should like to, but I can't; really, I can't. I implore you, do not try a tempted soul thus. I am going to leave you, Fabian, and I now bid you goodby. I no longer opposed his departure; and, standing, he shook hands with me, took his hat, which he had placed on the table, and made for the door. I accompanied him down the stairs, and, somewhat more lucid, asked: "By the way, did you not come here on some mission?"

No, none, keep silent on all you have heard and seen . . . or rather, say whatever you like in six months' time.

On the side-walk he pressed my fingers, and embracing me whispered again: "You are a terrible boy."

I watched him disappear into the night, and as life, at that minute, forced me to laugh, I stuck my tongue out at him, and mimicked the action of giving him a hard kick.

It no longer rained, but the air was cold. I remembered that Wilde had no over-coat, and I told myself he must be poor. A gush of sentiment inundated my heart; I was sad and full of tenderness; seeking some consolation, I lifted my eyes: the moon was too beauti-

ful and swelled my pain. I thought now that Wilde had perhaps wrongly interpreted my words; that he had not understood that I could not be *serious*; that I had caused him pain. And, like a madman, I started to run after him; at each corner, I sought him with all the strength of my eyes and cried: "Sebastian! Sebastian!" Full speed, I raced through the boulevards until I saw that I had lost him.

Erring through the streets, I returned slowly, and my eyes never left the moon, companionable as a curse.



## Heard on the Bus

"Dit cher gif 'im moneh f' der fare?" "Sure I gif 'im—f' von, *you* should pay "MMZNMM" Condoctare, how far goes der bus donton? "MMNNZN" Der companeh makes lots o' moneh t'day "MMMZNN" Vy n' cher git ah front set, ve kin look bedder "NZMMMM" He goes fast t'day, look a' Fricks oreddy "NNNNZM" Sorigt, der steel bisniss has der percentidge "ZZZMMN" I tink I go 'n dresses bisniss "MNZZZZ" Naw, naw, wholsel, wholsel, not retel "NMMZMZ" U1 tek ah chence "ZMZMN" Cholie knows der line, he got Murphy's list "NMZNNN" Vell, U1 talk it over 'n my mind "WASCHNN-SKUWHARE."

